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Emphasizing that beginning literacy consists of experiences during the first years of life that lead to reading and writing, this booklet offers practical tips for parents who wish to create a literate home environment for their young children. The booklet discusses reading with the child, listening and talking to the child, going to the library together, and other informal activities. The booklet also contains recommended reading and resources for parents. (NKA)

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Beginning Literacy and Your Child

The most fundamental definition of literacy is being able to read and write. *Beginning* literacy, then, consists of experiences during the first years of life that lead to literate behavior – reading and writing.

Research has shown that children who take easily to both reading and writing are not necessarily brighter or more mature than other children. Rather, these children have had a lot of experiences with text prior to coming to school. Like walking and talking, literacy does not appear all at once, full blown; instead, it develops slowly through countless experiences with books and writing tools.

Just as children's abilities grow in language and countless other areas, so too grows literacy. By observing children's efforts to master talking, we can see that a long process of growth precedes an actual conversation. Talking arises from cries, grunts, and pointing that eventually become single-syllable utterances. These first words form the building blocks that eventually lead to longer sentences and clearer speech. Similarly, literacy arises from attempts at reading and writing that are supported by parents who read to children and who encourage both reading and writing.

Creating a Literate Environment

As with other skills, environment plays an extremely important role in developing literacy. And because literacy involves both written and oral language, the literate environment should provide many experiences in both written and oral modes.

Enjoyment of Books

One of the foundations of literacy involves understanding, appreciating, and enjoying books. This can occur only through active interaction with hundreds of books. Some parents introduce books to their infants in the crib. At first, babies may try to physically consume the books by chewing on the cover and pages.

Some books, like *Pat the Bunny*, are intended for infants. This book contains objects for the child to touch, see, and smell. We observed our 3-year-old daughter Becca "eating" *Pat the Bunny* at the age of 6 months. There are other books especially designed for very young hands and gums. The covers and the pages of these books are made of very thick cardboard. Other "infant-proof" books are made of plastic or cloth that cannot be torn and that can withstand a lot of chewing.

It is important to select books that the child will enjoy early in life and treasure in the future. These early books for toddlers should be short, with few words per page, but with enough content to be interesting, so that your soon-to-be 2- or 3-year-old still will be attracted to them.

Some excellent starter books include *Rosie's Walk*, *Goodnight Moon*, *Each Peach Pear Plum*, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, *Who Took the Farmer's Hat?*, and *The Very Busy Spider*.

Select books that contain topics of interest to your child. Before Becca could talk, she showed a wild interest in trains; two of her favorite books are still *The Little Red Caboose* and *The Little Engine That Could*.

Books for infants should be designed to withstand rough handling.

Alphabet books, counting books, word books, and shape books tend to be entertaining for introductory reading. Be careful to select books that are not oversimplified. The pictures ought to provide you and your child with many things to talk about other than the topic of the book.

In addition, your children should see you read for enjoyment, as well as for business and information. By doing so, you demonstrate that reading is a positive activity.

Other Reading Materials

Children gain concepts of literacy from *all* print material, and youngsters enjoy imitating their parents reading. This imitation is a rich source for literacy development. For instance, children want to receive and send mail just as their parents do. Arrange for your child to receive and send mail, and be sure to share junk mail with them.

You can use magazine and newspaper pictures and the comics to read with your children, allowing them to see that pictures as well as text can be read. Newspapers and magazines also allow children to "read" the same material as their parents.

At 23 months of age, Becca was in the process of being toilet trained, and we were keeping a close eye on her. But, as sometimes happens, she slipped away from us one day. She wasn't in any of her usual play areas, so we called her name. "Here I am," came her voice from the master bathroom. We found her on the toilet, "reading" one of the magazines that are kept close by.

Writing in the Literate Environment

A child's interest in writing can be used to stimulate beginning literacy. Several researchers have found that many children write before they begin to read. We know that the more children write, the more they are able to relate meaning to text. Therefore, you should provide your children with paper, pencils, crayons, and markers. Becca has a drawer in an end table in the living room where she keeps all her writing tools. For more information, see *You Can Help Your Young Child with Writing* (Baghban, 1989).

Listening and Talking

Although literacy is firmly tied to print, a wide variety of experience with language is essential to literacy development. Through folktales, rhymes, songs, prayers, games, records, tapes, and stories told orally on a particular holiday or as a part of family history, children learn that there are many ways to say the same things. They get a "feel" for language used in different ways, and they soon sense that language is entertaining and expressive and not simply a means of exchanging information. A good source for parents who want to use such stories is Allison's (1987) *I'll Tell You a Story, I'll Sing You a Song.*

Traditional finger plays, rhymes, or chants that are accompanied by finger movements promote literacy. Some beloved finger plays include: "Where Is Thumbkin?", "The

Itsy Bitsy Spider," and "I'm a Little Teapot."

Beginning literacy develops partially from living in a literate house furnished with many of the experiences given in the preceding examples. Be sure to select items and activities from all categories discussed.

However, even if a house has these items, it is only a *beginning* for the development of literacy. A house with furnishings is just a house; it is not a home. The development of a home requires family interactions. Making a literate house a literate home also requires family interactions. It is now time to consider the interactions that take place in the literate home.

Creating Literate Interactions

At 34 months of age, Becca was playing with small figures on a printed fabric map when the following conversation took place.

Mommy: Where should we put this elephant?

Becca: In the zoo! (Puts the elephant figure on the pictured elephant.) Here's a bus going to the zoo. R-r-r-r. (Pushing a bus along the road.) Here we are!

Mommy: How does the driver know it's the zoo?

Becca: The sign.

Mommy: Where?

Becca: (Pointing to the sign on the map.) Right here, zoo! Let's paint!

Mommy: Okay, after we put these toys away.

This interaction illustrates some principles of parent-child interactions:

- Learning is *play*. (Both of you should be having fun.)
- Stop when your child is ready to stop.

- Children do not have to be *taught* to walk or talk, so do not *teach* literacy; it grows naturally through literate interactions.

Encouraging Talking

Reading means understanding written language. But that language is a *special* language; it is more explicit than language used when speaking face-to-face. In order for children to make sense out of written language, they must be encouraged to use explicit, detailed language. Here are some ways to do that.

- Encourage your child to talk.
- When your children are talking to other adults, do not translate what they mean. Let your children learn from the experience, encouraging them to become more explicit as they try to be understood.
- Don't accept whining, grunts, groans, and pointing when your children are capable of saying what they want. (Use parental sense here, however, for demanding explicit language when your child is tired will frustrate both of you.)
- Realize that some language that has become important to your child is unique to your family. For example, some nights Becca will not go to sleep without her "night socks." Night socks are two pairs of lace-trimmed socks that are too big for Becca to wear with shoes (but are "just right" to wear in bed). Imagine the uninformed new baby sitter trying to find Becca's night socks!
- Do not always accept inexplicit language in meaningful conversation; ask for further explanation. For example, at 28 months, Becca began using "you know" to reduce talking:

  Daddy: What did you have for lunch at Miss Deana's?
  Becca: You know!
  Daddy: No, I don't. I'm asking because I want to know. (Repeats question.)

- Ask questions, but realize that it is easy to frame a question that your child knows you have the answer to. Asking too many of these questions encourages simple, nonexplicit language. Instead, ask questions that require the child to give you new information:

  Did you go somewhere today?
  Whom did you see (or play with) today?
  What kind of cookies shall we make today?
  Whom would you like to play with today?

Reading with Your Child

Reading with your child encourages beginning literacy. By setting aside a certain time *every day* for reading, you can establish a routine and an expectation for reading. Reading becomes an activity that you just do—as opposed to a special event.

In addition to establishing a regular reading time, try to read with your children whenever they ask. By reading when your children want to, you create the idea and feeling that reading is a good way to spend time.

By reading with your child, you provide the sounds of written language, demonstrate how to handle a book and how to turn its pages, and develop in your child an expectation that text and pictures will make sense. This is an extremely important step in beginning literacy. Children in kindergarten and first grade who have been read with at home are the ones who hold the books right-side up and who turn pages from front to back.

The easiest way to start reading with your child is to talk about pictures. Even before children can talk, parents can start talking about the pictures in a book being read. For example, in *Goodnight Moon* (Brown, 1947) the text begins:

In the great green room
There was a telephone
And a red balloon
And a picture of....

Reading to children plays a key role in developing literacy.

The text names some of what is in the accompanying picture, but you might continue, "I also see a bunny and a bed and a fireplace." Long before children can talk, they can look for and point out objects that you name. Books with pictures of objects and their labels also are good for this kind of interaction.

As your children begin to talk, and particularly when they are in the "what's that?" stage, encourage them to label objects and characters. When Becca asked, "What's that?" about objects that we had labeled for her countless times, we would turn her question into a game. At 18 months of age, Becca would point to a mouse and ask, "What's that?"

"It's an elephant!" we would say.
"No!" (Becca would giggle)
"It's an airplane!"
"No!" (More giggling)
"It's Mommy!"
"No!" (Outright laughter)
"Then what is it?"
"It's a mouse!" (Everybody laughs)

This interaction became very ritualized. We always began, "It's an elephant!" This would signal that the game was about to begin. Remember, this game works only when you have already labeled the same object 20, 30, or 40 times. The same game can be played with favorite characters in a book.

Looking for special items in a picture includes your child in the reading of a book. For example, you can ask your child to point to the mouse in *Goodnight Moon* or to the next character in *Each Peach Pear Plum*.

A common practice that many parents seem to do naturally is to omit important parts of the text and let the child fill them in. Begin by leaving out one important word. For example, "Once upon a time, in a house in the woods, lived the three _____."

As your child grows, and the story has been read many times, you can omit more words until, ultimately, your child is telling the story. It is not important that your child provide the precise words; you want your child to

provide words that make sense. In *Curious George* the text says, "Curious George put the hat on." Becca says, "Curious George put the hat on his head." What she says is meaningful (in fact more explicit than the text) and demonstrates full comprehension. Therefore, we do not correct her on this point. Precision in reading, as in everything else, comes in good time.

A practice that is similar to omitting words is changing the text to make it silly. Again, this is done only when the child is very familiar with the book.

Daddy: And the chicken said, "I'll huff, and I'll puff...."
Becca: No! (Laughing)
Daddy: And the rabbit said....
Becca: No! (Still laughing)

This interchange goes on, three to four times, until Daddy finally says it right.

Let your child tell you what will happen next in a familiar story; then turn the page and see that your child is right.

Learning Is Playing

We do not encourage anyone to sit down with the intention of *teaching* a child. That intent structures interactions that tend to be frustrating for both child and parent because, typically, neither the child nor the parent can meet the goals of the interaction. Rather, children should learn by playing alone, with friends, and with parents. As your children engage in play, follow their lead and then extend what they are doing. While drawing with your child, for example, you may start to write, or your child may ask you to write. Mommy and Becca are drawing together (a very common activity).

Mommy: I am going to write Becca—B e c c a.
Becca: Write Mommy!
Mommy: (Writes) M o m m y.

This game continues as Mommy writes *Daddy*, *Abby*, *Linda*, and *Steven*. Sometimes the game is played using magnetic letters. We make it a point to use both uppercase

and lowercase letters. The game can quickly change to finding magnetic letters and using them to name people.

Becca: Here's a *b* (Finding a *b*). That's for me.
Mommy: And an *m*.
Becca: That's Mommy!

Becca learned letters through play. We did not sit down with flash cards and demand that she tell us the letters.

Daily tasks provide opportunities to play, learn, and develop beginning literacy. Becca loves to help cook and bake. When she was 2, we put her in a place away from the stove and oven, and she poured, measured, broke open eggs, and stirred. This started with a lot of help from Mommy and Daddy, but Becca quickly became independent in what she could do. During cooking she heard us read recipes and directions. We also had to count: "Get two pieces of bread. We need three plates."

Store books where children can easily reach them. When children pick up books to read by themselves, they are playing at reading—an extremely important activity in developing beginning literacy. Although your child may

Activities such as helping in the kitchen can promote literacy skills.

not actually be reading the text, this reading-like behavior is one of the steps researchers have found to be positively linked to reading. Your child is building a mental model for how stories should be read.

When your child is engaged in reading-like behavior, you must remember that the child is still playing. Do not insist on a completely accurate or correct reading of the text; simply enjoy and learn from what the child thinks the text should be.

You should aim to enjoy a literate interaction with your child. Here are some tips.

- Let the child decide when to stop.
- Watch for signs of tiring.
- Never force the activity.
- Let the child's interests dictate the activity.
- Don't push a reading game if the child is not responding—just read.
- Pick short readings for sleepyheads.
- Skip reading altogether if the child is too tired.
- Let the child pick the story.
- Read your child's favorites, not your own—children like books for reasons different from those of adults.
- Be prepared to read favorites often.

You may be tired of reading a particular book, but it contains something your child *wants* to hear. Research has shown that it is through these favorite books that children begin to identify words and phrases that they can read. So read your child's choice, even though you may be tired of the story. As with other favorite objects, children go through cycles of favorite books to read.

Going to the Library

Although helping a child collect favorite books in a personal library is an effective way to encourage literacy, the public library also is a great source for materials that generate literate interactions. Make going to the library a special event. The library is a place to sit and read both familiar and new books. It is a chance to get out of the house and have some fun with Mommy and Daddy.

Because children's literature is generally shelved by author in a library, children can go to a particular location and find all the books of a favorite writer. This may seem silly when you're dealing with children who are not reading, but children pick up on subtle clues. For example, Beatrix Potter wrote those cute, tiny books with the soft pictures (*Peter Rabbit*, etc.). Children may not know the name of the author, but they soon know where the little books are shelved.

Reading Is All Around You

Literacy experiences are not limited to books. Print is all around us, and children notice it. Parents can make special efforts to point out print found in stores, on street signs, and on products in the home. We are constantly bombarded by print, so the selection of what to point out should be based on your child's interests and experiences. For example, Becca's grandparents live near Washington, DC. When a cereal box on our table had pictures of monuments, along with the word *Washington*, it was a good opportunity to point out the print in the context of a discussion about Grandma and Grandpa.

It's only natural to look for street signs when going for a walk. Read signs, street names, and numbers and names on mailboxes when walking with your child. Children pick up quickly on the signs around them, and many conversations can be based on what children see and what they expect to see. The 2-year-old son of a friend startled his

parents by pointing to the first print he ever read and calling out "one way." You may find that your child begins "reading" the signs around town long before reading books. Of course, the drawback is the immediate recognition of signs that you would like to avoid. Fast food restaurants hold a particular attraction for children but cannot be visited every time the sign is "read."

Assisting Literacy Growth

Parents cannot stop the growth of literacy, but they can provide an environment that will either foster or discourage it. To foster literacy, provide a literate household well furnished with books, magazines, newspapers, videotapes, records, audiotapes, paper, pens, crayons, and markers. Recognize, too, that talking and listening are highly related to developing beginning literacy.

In addition to providing the items that make a child's environment more literate, parents must interact with their child in a literate manner. Above all, this means setting aside time to read with your child every day, arranging for a wide variety of literate interactions to occur while doing daily chores, and noticing the print all around you and your child.

Encouraging beginning literacy will not necessarily make your child an early reader. But understanding how language and reading work will make the process of learning to read easier and more fun for your child.

Recommended Reading for Parents

Books

Family Storybook Reading. Denny Taylor and Dorothy S. Strickland. Heinemann, 1986.

More than the ABCs: The Early Stages of Reading and Writing. Judith A. Schickedanz. National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1986.

Bibliographies

Bibliography of Books for Children. Sylvia Sunderlin. Association for Childhood Education International, 1989.

Books Kids Will Sit Still For. Judy Freeman. Alleyside, 1984.

Eyeopeners! How to Choose and Use Children's Books about Real People, Places, and Things. Beverly Krobrin. Viking, 1988.

I'll Tell You a Story, I'll Sing You a Song: A Parent's Guide to the Fairy Tales, Fables, Songs, and Rhymes of Childhood. Christine Allison. Delacorte, 1987.

Children's Books

Curious George. H.A. Rey. Houghton Mifflin, 1941.

Each Peach Pear Plum. Janet Ahlberg and Allan Ahlberg. Viking, 1978.

Goodnight Moon. Margaret W. Brown. Harper & Row, 1947.

The Little Engine That Could. Watty Piper. Platt & Munk, 1954.

The Little Red Caboose. M. Potter. Western, 1953.

Pat the Bunny. Dorothy Kunhardt. Golden, no date.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit. Beatrix Potter. Frederick Warne, no date.

The Very Busy Spider. Eric Carle. Philomel, 1984.

Who Took the Farmer's Hat? Joan L. Nodset. Harper & Row, 1963.

Organizations That Can Help You

Association for Childhood Education International, 11141 Georgia Avenue, Wheaton, MD 20902
1-800-423-3563

International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139 302-731-1600

National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1834 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20009-5786 1-800-424-2460

Resources for Parents from IRA

Books

Children, Parents, and Reading. Mary M. Boehnlein and Beth H. Hagar. No. 341. US$5.75; IRA members, US$4.25.

Magazines for Children. Donald R. Stoll, Ed. Copublished by IRA and EDPRESS. No. 153. US$5.25; IRA members, US$3.50.

The New Read-Aloud Handbook. Jim Trelease. Published by Penguin Books and codistributed by IRA. No. 637. US$9.95; IRA members, US$9.25.

Young Children and Picture Books: Literature from Infancy to Six. Mary Renck Jalongo. Published by NAEYC and codistributed by IRA. No. 634. US$10.00; IRA members, US$9.00.

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Parent Booklets

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Helping Your Child Become a Reader. Nancy L. Roser. No. 161

How Can I Prepare My Young Child for Reading? Paula C. Grinnell. No. 163

You Can Encourage Your High School Student to Read. Jamie Myers. No. 162

You Can Help Your Young Child with Writing. Marcia Baghban. No. 160

Single copies of these parent booklets are available at a cost of US$1.75 each, prepaid only. Send your check to Parent Booklets at the address listed earlier. Please specify both title and publication number when ordering.

Parent Brochures

IRA has available ten brochures covering a variety of topics pertaining to ways in which parents can help children of all ages become readers. To receive single copies of all ten brochures, send a self-addressed envelope stamped with first class postage for *three* ounces to Parent Brochures at the address listed earlier. The brochures are available in bulk quantities also, and ordering information appears in each brochure. (Requests from outside the USA should include a self-addressed envelope, but postage is not required.)

Children's Choices

Children's Choices is a yearly list of books that children identify as their favorites. To receive a single copy, send a self-addressed envelope stamped with first class postage for *four* ounces to Children's Choices at the address listed earlier.

This booklet is part of a series designed to provide practical ideas parents can use to help their children become readers. Many of the booklets are being copublished by IRA and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.

ERIC/RCS Information Services

For more information on the development of reading and other language skills, write or call: ERIC/RCS, Smith Research Center, Suite 150, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47408, USA. Telephone: (812) 855-5847.

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